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National reporting to the Commission on Sustainable Development

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report briefly discusses the history of national reporting to the Commission on Sustainable Development, including the current status of reporting to the Commission at its sixth session. Issues that are linked to national reporting and that have been taken up by the Commission since its first session, such as common access, streamlining of reporting requirements, indicators and regional exchange of national information, are also reviewed in context.

Emphasis is placed on making maximum use of this information, through succinct summary reference data, including tables, graphs and directories, and by the establishment of a database of official country information, to be updated on a continuous basis, and made available to all interested users at all times via the Internet's World Wide Web.

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I. Introduction

1. Chapter 40 of Agenda 21[1] stressed the importance of providing decision makers with information that would assist them in formulating integrated strategies, policies and plans related to sustainable development and all of its constituent parts. Since its first session, the Commission on Sustainable Development has emphasized the need for reliable, accessible and streamlined information both for national-level decision-making and for its own deliberations. The present discussion summarizes the experience of the past six years and suggests modalities that may be pursued in the future.

II. Voluntary national reporting to the Commission on Sustainable Development

2. At its first session in 1993, the Commission on Sustainable Development decided to invite Governments and organizations to submit information to the Commission, on a voluntary basis, at its second, third and fourth sessions in order to allow it to monitor progress at the national level in the implementation of Agenda 21.

3. A more comprehensive approach was adopted for reporting to the fifth session of the Commission, in preparation for the nineteenth special session of the General Assembly to review and appraise the implementation of Agenda 21. The Assembly, in paragraph 13 (b) of its resolution 50/113 of 20 December 1995, requested the Secretary-General to prepare country profiles providing a concise presentation of progress made and constraints encountered in implementing Agenda 21 at the national level, compiled on the basis of national information received and in close cooperation with the Governments concerned. One hundred and one countries submitted country profiles to the Commission in 1997.

4. Most recently, the General Assembly, in paragraph 133 (b) of the annex to its resolution S/19-2 of 28 June 1997, adopted at its nineteenth special session, decided that the Commission on Sustainable Development should continue to provide a forum for the exchange of national experience and best practices in the area of sustainable development, including through voluntary national communications or reports. For this purpose, guidelines were prepared for reporting to the sixth session of the Commission, with specific reference to the items in the agenda of that session.

5. Prior to the fifth session of the Commission, the proportion of those reporting ranged from approximately one third of all Member States (in 1995), to a figure as low as one fifth in 1996, and back up to over one half in 1997. One can assume that there have been many reasons for low levels of response, including insufficient capacity to prepare reports, inadequate access to information at the national level, inadequate coordination of information at the national level and the burden put on countries to report to an increasing number of intergovernmental forums.

6. In addition, questions have been raised about the usefulness of the information. One of the main purposes of reporting (though not the only one) was to use the country information as an integral part of the substantive reports being provided to the Commission at each of its sessions. In fact, this has rarely been possible. Reports of the Secretary-General have to be prepared well in advance of the session of the Commission in order to allow time for editing, translation and distribution; however, national reports have, on the average, been submitted past the suggested deadline, and well after the date at which the reports of the Secretary-General had to be finalized. This has led to a situation in which States have been

sharing information with the United Nations Secretariat but not with each other, except through national presentations given during the sessions of the Commission itself.

7. Last year, a new mechanism was put in place by the United Nations Secretariat in order to ensure that all of the information was available to all States and other interested users on a continuous basis. This mechanism is the United Nations System-wide Sustainable Development Web Site,[2] discussed below.

III. Common and compatible access to United Nations system information on sustainable development: the Web site

8. The Commission on Sustainable Development, at its third session, in April 1995, noted the importance of developing, among the organizations of the United Nations system, a common or compatible system of access to their respective databases, in order to share data fully, to streamline the collection and interpretation of data and to identify data gaps, for the purpose of providing more comprehensive and integrated data to decision makers at the national, regional and international levels.[3]

9. In response to this request, a series of inter-agency and expert meetings were organized. The primary result was the decision to establish a sustainable development Web site[4] that would link information across the United Nations system, with a primary focus on official country information. For each country, information is divided into social, economic, natural resource and institutional issues.[5] This Web site was established in 1997, and the country profiles prepared for the fifth session of the Commission have been used to establish a core database on the site. Furthermore, with the proliferation of national Web sites, links are being made to official country sites as well as to other United Nations system sites.

10. This means that (a) all national information submitted to the Commission is now available to Member States and all other interested users on a permanent basis; and (b) that the information is being continuously updated. Countries may submit new information at any time, and on any issue, and that information will be reflected on the Web site. The establishment of an accessible database such as this should also help to overcome the time constraints now faced by task managers in the preparation of documentation for the Commission.

IV. Streamlining of national reporting requirements

11. At its fourth session, in April 1996, the Commission noted that, in the period following the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, States were being confronted with a growing number of reporting requirements in the field of sustainable development, and it requested the Secretary-General to make proposals at the fifth session of the Commission for streamlining national reporting related to sustainable development.[6] These are contained in document E/CN.17/1997/6 of 18 March 1997.

12. Further to these proposals, the United Nations Secretariat developed and has provided an updated calendar of reporting requirements for United Nations system organizations and relevant convention secretariats on the Web site of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs,[7] and it has continued to work with other organizations on streamlining, through the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) and its subcommittees, as well as on a bilateral basis. In addition, the streamlining process has been linked to the parallel

exercises of ensuring common access to United Nations system databases and maintaining the United Nations System-wide Sustainable Development Web Site. It is anticipated that, by making information available electronically, on a country-by-country basis, the secretariats concerned will find it easier to share national information and avoid duplication of requests to Governments.

V. Regional exchange of national information

13. In paragraph 133 (c) of the annex, entitled "Programme for the further implementation of Agenda 21", to its resolution S/19-2, the General Assembly noted that the Commission for Sustainable Development should provide a forum for the exchange of experience on regional and subregional initiatives and regional collaboration for sustainable development. This could include the promotion of voluntary regional exchange of national experience in the implementation of Agenda 21 and, *inter alia*, the possible development of modalities for reviews within regions by and among those countries that voluntarily agree to do so.

14. This issue has been researched during late 1997 and early 1998, and it was one of two major items in the agenda of a meeting of regional organizations convened in New York in February 1998. Background information and proposals for the consideration of the Commission on Sustainable Development are contained in document E/CN.17/1998/9, which is before the Commission at its sixth session.

VI. Indicators

15. The programme of work that has been undertaken on behalf of the Commission to develop indicators of sustainable development is an exercise separate from national reporting to the Commission. From the beginning, the indicators have been seen as being of primary use for augmenting and systematizing information available for decision-making at the national level. Furthermore, testing of the indicators is currently under way, and a revised list of indicators is foreseen as appearing by the year 2000, at which time it will be again submitted to the Commission. Information on the status of this programme is contained in background document, No. 18, entitled "Status report on the implementation of the Commission on Sustainable Development work programme on the indicators of sustainable development", before the Commission at its sixth session.

16. At the same time, on many occasions, individual countries have expressed the view that national reporting to the Commission could be enhanced by the use of some common indicators which would lend themselves to monitoring progress in the implementation of Agenda 21. In the past year, an effort has been made to use some qualitative "yes" or "no" indicators, specifically in relation to questions of institutions, policies and international legal instruments, in order to provide a tabular basis for time-series data. This information is contained in background document, No. 23, entitled "Assessment of progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 at the national level: summary tables and graphs". The Commission may find more specific, indicator-type questions useful to it in the future.

VII. Reporting to the Commission on Sustainable Development at its sixth session

17. Guidelines for reporting to the Commission at its sixth session were sent to all States Members of the United Nations in August 1997. These guidelines requested information on all of the agenda items to be discussed at the sixth session, including freshwater, industry, technology, science, education and awareness-raising, finance, capacity-building, and the outstanding chapters to be reviewed from the Barbados Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States[8] as well as general policy- and institution-related questions, as indicated above. As of mid-March 1998, approximately 40 countries had responded. Where relevant, the information provided was used to update, on the World Wide Web site,[9] the country information that had been submitted to the Commission at its fifth session. Information provided for 1998 by countries that had not previously submitted country profiles was also posted on the Web site, and this, too, will be updated as new information becomes available.

18. In addition, the cumulative, updated information derived from both the country profiles and the 1998 guideline responses have been summarized in four background documents, available to the Commission at its sixth session. The titles and numbers of these are as follows: "Assessment of progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 at the national level: summary tables and graphs" (Background paper, No. 23); "Assessment of progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 at the national level: table of key coordination mechanisms and actions" (Background paper, No. 24); "List of official sustainable development contacts" (Background paper, No. 25); and "List of official World Wide Web sites identified by Governments in their national reporting to the Commission on Sustainable Development" (Background paper, No. 26).

VIII. Summary

19. National reporting to the Commission on Sustainable Development has evolved over the past five years and continues to do so. It has taken into account issues of streamlining and of "regionalization"; it has sought to inform discussion of specific items in the agenda of the Commission; and it has provided succinct summary reference data, through tables, graphs and directories, for the Commission's use. Perhaps most importantly, the broadening of access to this national information afforded by the World Wide Web site encourages use of the data throughout the year, and not only when the Commission is in session. Finally, greater access permits use by all interested parties, thereby promoting information exchange, streamlining and the public participation intrinsic to sustainable development.

IX. Proposal

20. It is proposed that future voluntary national reporting to the Commission continue to focus on the specific agenda items of each session, specifically by updating baseline information already provided in the 1997 country profiles, where available. This would imply that, by the time of the 10-year review of the implementation of Agenda 21 in the year 2002, the Commission and the General Assembly would have ready access to the information they will require. Furthermore, subject to the decision of the Commission regarding regional exchange of national information, this information may have gained additional value through analysis and evaluation at the regional level.

Notes

[1] *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992*, vol. I, *Resolutions Adopted by the Conference* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigendum), resolution 1, annex II.

[2] The United Nations System-wide Sustainable Development Web Site is located at the following Internet address: http://www.un.org/esa/agenda21/natlinfo/

[3] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1995, Supplement No. 12* (E/1995/32), chap. I, para. 7.

[4] Background information is contained in documents E/CN.17/1996/18 and Add.1, and E/CN.17/1997/6, annex III.

[5] Social issues include poverty, demographics, health, education and human settlements; economic issues include international cooperation and trade, changing consumption patterns, financing, technology, industry, transport and sustainable tourism; natural resource issues include agriculture, atmosphere, biodiversity, desertification and drought, energy, forests, freshwater, land management, mountains, oceans and coastal areas, toxic chemicals, and waste and hazardous materials; and institutional issues include integrated decision-making, major groups, science, information and international law. Links are also made under each of these four files to relevant official indicators available on the Internet.

[6] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1996, Supplement No. 8* (E/1996/28), chap. I, sect. C, decision 4/8, para. 6.

[7] This information is located at the following World Wide Web address: http://www.un.org/dpcsd/earthsummit/stream/calend-n.htm.

[8] *Report of the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, Bridgetown, Barbados, 25 April-6 May 1994* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.94.I.18 and corrigenda), chap. I, resolution 1, annex II.

[9] That is to say, the United Nations System-wide Sustainable Development Web Site, located at: http://www.un.org/esa/agenda21/natlinfo/